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ABSTRACT

There are ways to meet the need for social studies reform and revitalization other than adopting an "agenda of inquiry" which would incorporate the potentially appealing aspects of the radical perspective, as proposed by Fred M. Newmann. As a result of recent reform reports, many educators have already taken action to improve educational quality. For example, two reform proposals, the Carnegie Report and the Paideia Proposal, are being piloted in some school districts, and professional organizations in the social studies and the disciplines are attempting to influence what is happening in American schools. An agenda of inquiry, if defined as the process of active learning and critical thinking and discourse which will help students become more humane, insightful, and active citizens, is supported. There are, however, problems with trying to take a radical approach to education: (1) radicals begin with conclusions; (2) radical writing contains mystifying jargon and abstract and deterministic analyses; (3) teachers are not equipped to use the Socratic dialogue; and (4) teachers and academics are not the only ones who can make decisions about curriculum content and teaching methods. (RM)

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SOCIAL STUDIES IN THE U.S. SCHOOLS:

A Response to A Paper by Fred M. Newmann

by

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Presented to the Annual Meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium, hosted by the Bundeszentrale fur Politsiche Bilding, at Irsee, Federal Republic of Germany, June 18-22, 1984.

In his very informative and provocative paper, Professor Newmann concerned himself both with what is happening in American schools and what he believes ought to be happening in them. First he described what he calls "mainstream practice" or the modal pattern of instruction in the social studies. Secondly, he provided an analysis of what he perceives to be the strengths and weaknesses of the body of thought that is emerging from the writings of academics of radical persuasion. Finally, Professor Newmann suggested an "agenda of inquiry" which he deems essential "if historically persistent, regressive forms of social education" are to be effectively challenged. That "agenda of inquiry", based on the world-view of radical academics, would consist of "knowledge to be taught" which emphasizes the significance of dominant interests, struggles for autonomy, contradictions, and the social construction of knowledge." Such ideas, say radical academics should not be "foisted upon" students and teachers. They should instead emerge from "critical discourse" about particular, local circumstances which by connecting teachers and students to their own cultural histories will "empower them to define their own curriculum."

I appreciate this opportunity to comment on Professor Newmann's paper. In view of the limited time available, my observations will be limited to two main points. First I would like to draw attention to several significant developments in the social studies which deserve more notice than Professor Newmann accorded them. Secondly, I would like to focus on some very fundamental problems that stem from trying to plumb the radical approach, even if that approach were to be desired.

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This is a time of great ferment in American education. Throughout the nation there is mounting concern about the shortcomings of the schools. The year 1983 saw the publication of 16 major reform reports. In the first half of 1984 four additional reports made their appearance, and more are in the offing. The primary focus of most of those reports is the high school, admittedly the most troubled of the United States' educational institutions. And many of these reports concern themselves with the social studies.

The proliferation of reports on the health of American schools is a significant development. The importance of those reports goes well beyond their specific recommendations; the occurrence of so many reports and studies has created a climate that demands attention and that already has resulted in action. Twenty-nine states have increased their requirements for graduation, and a number of those states have increased the years which must be devoted to social studies. In April of this year, New York increased the number of years of social studies required for high school graduation from three to four. New York also mandated the study of foreign language for the first time, and it is revamping its state examination system. In the wake of those changes, the New York State Legislature approved a $460 million increase in school aid, the largest boost in the state's history.

California's legislature enacted a far-reaching educational reform bill, SB 813, which was signed into law on July 28, 1983. In that law's introductory statement, the legislature asserted its belief that schools "should develop each pupil's sense of respect of self and others, personal and social responsibility and critical thinking." Then the legislature went on to mandate three years of social studies in grades 9-12, including United States history and geography; world history, culture and geography; American government, civics, and economics. Like New York, California will rely on statewide testing in grades 3, 6, 8, 10 and 12 to insure that the curriculum as spelled out in its History-Social Science Framework and in legislation is taught in

classrooms. And again following New York's lead, California's legislature just this month provided for very substantial increases in the funding of schools.

Critics of the reform reports have faulted them for over-emphasizing what has been called "the Toyota problem," that is the problem of improving productivity and efficiency and their lack of attention to teaching children how and why to participate in the democratic process. Some reports deserve castigation on that score, but sweeping criticism of all of them is unjustified. Certain of the reports do devote considerable attention to both the process and the content of education, and they are specifically concerned that both process and content serve the humane ends of education. I would direct your attention to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching proposals which are contained in Ernest Boyer's book entitled High School. The Core Curriculum of Common Learning which the Carnegie Report espouses is a study of those consequential ideas, experiences, and traditions common to all of us by virtue of our membership in the human family at a particular moment in history. The content of that core curriculum is to extend beyond academic specialities or discreet disciplines and focus on more transcendent issues, moving from courses to coherence.

The Carnegie Report proposes a one-semester seminar on work in which students would consider what determines the status and rewards of different forms of work as well as probe the deeper meanings of work in the various cultures. The curriculum also includes the completion of a Senior Independent Project by each student. The student would investigate and write a report that focuses on a significant social issue which draws upon the various fields of study in the academic core. Still another attribute of the Carnegie plan is its Service Term which would extend beyond the formal academic program and require each student to participate in volunteer service to the communities of which they are a part.

The Carnegie Program puts all students on a single track. It does not reserve the Seminar on Work, the Service Term or the Independent Study for just those who are

academically able. The program is intended to ensure that all young people will realize their full potential. Consequently it is designed to keep career options open and to make possible a smooth transition to work and further education.

I have prepared a digest of the Carnegie recommendations, because they constitute a blue-print for curricular improvement, and because they have far-reaching implications for helping students understand and act in larger socio-civic spheres. A copy of that digest is available to any of you who may like one.

A second reform proposal worthy of attention because it, too, is concerned with the larger aspects of education is The Paideia Proposal. Written by Mortimer Adler on behalf of the Paideia Group of 13 educators and scholars, it takes as its basic premise that all children are educable in the deepest sense of the word; they can be educated to participate knowledgeably as citizens and to reach their fullest human potential in mental, moral, and spiritual growth. To shunt some children aside as merely trainable for a job is discriminatory. A democratic society must provide not only an equal quantity of basic schooling for all, but an equal quality.

To provide education of equal quality for all, the Paideia Proposal espouses a three-pronged approach to learning or ways of improving the mind:

1. The acquisition of organized knowledge including knowledge of history, geography, and social studies is to be didactic: lecture, textbooks, and recitation. This is currently the major form of learning in most schools, as Professor Newmann and others have pointed out.
2. The development of intellectual skills. To continue learning throughout life, students must acquire and practice not only the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening and calculating, but the skills of problem solving, observing, measuring, estimating, and exercising critical judgement. To develop such skills requires observation of a skilled practitioner, drill, and supervised practice, very much on the model of players instructed by an athletic coach. Therefore, "coaching" is the name which Adler gives to the method

by which intellectual skills are to be developed.

3. Enlarged understanding of ideas and values. This form of learning is to take place in the seminar where the teacher and the students engage in Socratic dialogue.

Like the Carnegie Program, The Paideia Proposal rejects the idea of tracking. It recommends a common curriculum for all students, because it assumes that all children are eager to learn and to be challenged and that they share a common humanity, common civil rights, and the common right to the pursuit of happiness. But the Proposal cautions that social change is required, if it is to succeed. Students cannot be expected to strive, if they face certain unemployment. Society must be committed to full employment. Further, parents and students must understand that education is meant to provide more than financial advantage for individuals; it should foster the living of a good life.

The Paideia Proposal currently is being piloted in the Chicago City Schools, the Atlanta, Georgia Schools, and in schools in Massachusetts, California and other states.

Apart from the importance of the reports and the proposals for curricular changes which the best of them suggest, mention needs to be made of the ways in which professional organizations in the social studies and the disciplines are attempting to influence what is happening in American schools. The National Council for the Social Studies published an Essentials Statement designed to acquaint the general public with the goals of instruction in the Social Studies. That pamphlet has been widely distributed throughout the nation and has influenced a number of school boards. The National Council also has set to work on a suggested scope and sequence for instruction. Its earliest drafts have not been too well received, but the stage at least has been set for discussion and debate of a desirable pattern for the social studies.

Organizations which represent the various disciplines are becoming increasingly active in the elementary and secondary schools. Some of them are concerned with production of model courses of study and/or scope and sequence documents for their

particular academic areas. Two specific examples are economics and geography. The American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians have formed special committees concerned with the teaching of history in elementary and secondary schools. These organizations are sponsoring a wide variety of special training programs, seminars, and workshops for teachers. They combined forces to work with other groups interested in history to sponsor National History Day. That program which encourages upper elementary and secondary school students to do original research in history began in 1980 with a few students in a few states participating. By 1982 some 65,000 students in 32 states took part. This year, 1984, saw 150,000 students participating in 44 states in local, county, and state programs. Winners of the state competitions now are gathered for a full week devoted to the celebration of history and learning at the University of Maryland.

Another example of the involvement of particular organizations in the social studies program in the schools is the involvement of the legal profession and the various law-related education projects. Time permits mention of just one program of significance, the Mock Trial Program. Last year some 15 thousand or more students in 21 states and the District of Columbia assumed the roles of prosecuting and defense attorneys and witnesses to prepare and present a hypothetical case in real courts of law and before their regular presiding judges. Evaluations of the Mock Trial program attest to its value in providing both cognitive growth and in fostering better understanding of the law and the concept of justice.

The examples of programs and proposals which bode well for the social studies which have been cited should not be taken as indications that all is well in American schools. The need for reform and revitalization in the social studies is great. But whether that need can be met by adopting "an agenda of inquiry" which would incorporate what Professor Newmann calls "the potentially appealing aspects of the radical perspective" is very doubtful.

Let me say at this juncture that I certainly support "an agenda of inquiry", if

by that we mean the process of active learning and critical thinking and discourse which will help students become more humane, more insightful, and more active participants in democratic societies. But I see some very fundamental problems with trying to take a radical approach to education.

One major problem is that the radicals seem to begin with conclusions. They have established a line to follow as evidenced by their talk of "knowledge to be taught". Inquiry, therefore, would begin from convictions or premises already established, so that despite the radicals insistence that they do not want their ideas "foisted upon" others, it looks as though they really are looking to students for support of those ideas rather than for inquiry into the assumptions or premises on which those ideas rest.

A second major problem is one which Professor Newmann identified in his paper. The writing of radical authors contains "mystifying jargon, excessively abstract and deterministic analyses." What is more, the radicals propose no curriculum and offer no programs. They rely instead on the vague hope that if teachers are "empowered" over their curriculum and pedagogy, if they and their students are "connected to their own cultural histories", they will "define" their own curriculum. Reality argues against such reliance. In the May, 1984 issue of Focus, a newsletter of the Joint Center for Political Studies which conducts research on public policy issues of special concern to black Americans, Eddie N. Williams describes one study of the dynamics of racial consciousness in these words:

> "By drawing attention to their status as a deprived and oppressed group, black consciousness helps blacks to replace the more negative overtones of the Protestant work ethic with a 'system-blame' ethic.... The result is a heightened sense of personal efficacy and increased mistrust of the political system."

Williams then goes on to observe that "This new political mood confronts us with two critical factors, efficacy and mistrust. A sense of personal efficacy is the most important determinant of voter participation among Americans. It can override the attitudinal handicaps that inhibit participation by low-income blacks who otherwise

are the least likely to register and vote.... But the other side of the coin is increased mistrust of the political system. Obviously, mistrust is not a healthy attitude, and it can turn the cycle in the opposite direction, reducing political participation and thus the political efficacy of the black community."

A third problem of considerable importance is that teachers the very persons on whom we must rely for establishing the necessary climate and engaging in Socratic dialogue with students are not equipped to do so. Their own collegiate experience, in most instances, provided them with no models. And their own personal predilections scarcely equip them to play the role of policy analyst and social critic. Teachers are not "movers and shakers" nor are they great risk-takers. Some studies even suggest that teachers who choose to remain in teaching today are less competent than those who leave it (Schlecty and Vance, 1981; Atkins, 1982). A more persuasive perspective is offered by Chapman and Hutcheson (1982) who view teachers electing to remain in the profession as possessing somewhat different competencies from those who leave. Using self-reporting questionnaire data, they found that respondents remaining in teaching perceived themselves as having good explaining, supervising, and organizing skill; those who left saw themselves as having better analytic skills.

A fourth and final problem with attempting to incorporate a radical perspective stems from the fact that teachers and academics are not the only ones who can make decisions about what is to be taught and how it is to be taught. As John W. Gardner, former U.S. Secretary Health, Education and Welfare observed, "Education is too important to be left to educators." In democratic societies policy decisions ultimately are made by the polity, and as of this moment the polity in the United States can best be described as "mainstream".

Let me conclude with an observation made by Linda McNeil of the Wisconsin Center for Public Policy in the Journal of Curriculum, 1981:

> "The literature which is critical of schooling tends to focus on those aspects that might constrain and control individuals and thereby contribute to

legitimating and maintaining existing social structures. But there are also aspects of the curricula and contexts of schools that are potentially liberating. Insofar as they enable students to develop socially valued knowledge and skills, i.e. cultural capital, or to form their own peer groups and sub-cultures, they may contribute to personal and collective autonomy and to possible critique and challenge of existing norms and institutions....

Schools are neither the all-powerful instruments of cultural and economic reproduction some have claimed them to be nor the prime sources of emancipation as others have promised. Yet, while schools are neither, they provide opportunities for both."